

A China-Handled Knife

A ONE-ACT PLAY ABOUT
YOUNG ABE LINCOLN

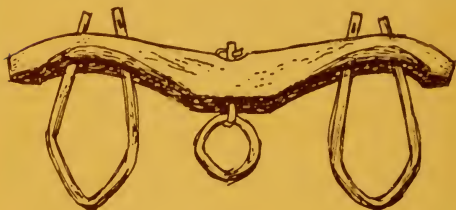
by E. P. Conkle



Samuel French

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YOUNG ABE LINCOLN

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A CHINA-HANDLED KNIFE

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Lincoln
Room

A CHINA-HANDLED KNIFE

STORY OF THE PLAY

A delightful play in which young Abe Lincoln is urged by Ann Rutledge to go to Master Mentor Graham's school to take an etiquette lesson with the little scholars there; and how Abe gets mixed up in the life of young Willie Purkapike and has to teach Willie a lesson or two; and how both he and Willie come out of the fracas good friends and a lot wiser. Willie's reward is a beautiful porcelain-handled knife from Abe; and Abe's is a mild scolding from Ann because he didn't get his etiquette learned.

A CHINA-HANDLED KNIFE

CAST
(6 Males ; 4 Females)

LITTLE MERCY PLOVER
ANN RUTLEDGE
ABE LINCOLN
MASTER MENTOR GRAHAM
WILLIAM PURKAPIKE
BENNIE
ARTHUR
PHILIP
SAIRY
BERTHA FINCH

THE SCENE: *Master Mentor Graham's schoolhouse in
New Salem, Illinois.*

A China-Handled Knife

Master Mentor Graham's school room.

There are rough-hewn, puncheon seats, and the Master's desk in front, and a fireplace at the back of the desks. Hanging to wooden pegs along the wall by the door in the rear are children's hats and bonnets, and the Master's light coat hangs behind his desk. There are a few tattered books on the puncheon seats, and on the Master's desk, and a split-hickory broom near the fireplace. Hanging on a nail behind the desk is a sort of silver medal. The door and one window near it are open, and the warm sunlight of a spring afternoon comes in through them. Within the room all seems vacant; but from outside we hear the loud and merry voices of a small group of children out at play—pum-pum-pullaway, or throwing-the-mall, or Sister Feby.

In a minute we see that the schoolroom is not empty, for we hear a small, girlish voice conning a spelling lesson, and we see her dimly, LITTLE MERCY PLOVER, over back near the fireplace, sitting on a stool, with one of the torn books, seriously at work all by herself.

LITTLE MERCY. (Saying the letters of one syllable) R-E— (Then, pronouncing the syllable) —re— (Then saying the rest of the letters) C-E-D-E— (Then pronouncing the syllable) —cede— (Then pronouncing the whole word) Recede. (Then, the next word) Actress. A-C-T—

(Then from outside goes up a huge shout and great

laughter; then a girl's scream; and then we hear ABE LINCOLN'S voice, loud)

ABE'S VOICE. Now, who in thunderation threw that mud-ball at me?

VOICES OF THE CHILDREN. Willie Purkapike! He throwed it! Et was Willie—! Yaaaa—!

ABE'S VOICE. All I got to say is—y' better learn to throw mud-balls straight, William, if you're bound to throw 'em a-tall!

ANN'S VOICE. (*Indignant*) Well, sakes-alive, Abe—

ABE'S VOICE. It'll wash off, I reckon. Too nice a day out to worry myself sick for a little mud! (*He bursts out singing*) "O-o-oh—" (*Loud and off-key*) "—Thou in whose presence my soul takes de-light. On whom in affliction I cal-l-l—"

(*ABE'S form looms in the door and he starts into the schoolroom as ANN comes up and motions him aside for her to enter first.*)

ANN. (*Entering, as ABE drops back with an awkward curtsey*) We may as well begin polishing up your manners right now, Abe! Ladies— (*As she comes in*)—first, you know.

ABE. (*Coming in after her, finishing the song*) "—My comfort by day, my song in the night—" (*We see that ABE, a young fellow of twenty-one, is all dressed up; wears a white cambric shirt, tow-linen pantaloons, a mixed-jeans coat with short sleeves, and carries a straw hat in his hand, which hat has a large, muddy spot on it*) "—My hope, my salvation, my al-l-l—"! I guess I ought to be settin' with my awl in my hand fixin' shoes like a cordwainer, instead of over here l'arnin' etikette this fine—

ANN. (*A neatly-dressed girl, with a parasol this afternoon; chiding*) Never mind, now, Abe—you promised me. (*She sees the hat*) Why didn't you speak severely to the little urchin—?

ABE. O-h—the hat isn't so much, and— (*Grinning*)

—maybe it was just my inborn, inbred natcheral sense-a perliteness croppin' out, Ann! (*Hopefully*) Maybe I don't need to go to no school to l'arn it!

ANN. Oh, yes—but you do. And right this afternoon! (*Looking toward the MASTER'S desk*) I wonder where Master Graham is—?

(*From the fireplace comes LITTLE MERCY'S voice conning her lesson.*)

LITTLE MERCY. *Lieu. L-I—* (ABE and ANN turn; discover her) —E-U. *Lieu. L-I-E—E-I—I-E—I—* (*Seeing ABE and ANN for the first time*) O-h, it's you, Abe! (*Jumping up*) Goody-goody! And—Ann! (*Eyeing ABE*) You goin' t' school, Abe? And Ann—?

ABE. I am, Little Mercy. Ann is highly enough educated the way she is—as well as mighty perty!

LITTLE MERCY. You's goin' to be here for spellin'?

ANN. Yes, and the week's lesson in etiquette.

LITTLE MERCY. (*Gleefully*) O-o-o-h, A-be! How to bow, and palaver in high tones, and swish your skirt ke-reckly?

ABE. You dog-gonned shootin'—only I wonder about them skirts, Little Mercy!

ANN. You may make all the fun you like about it, Abe, but—

LITTLE MERCY. (*Worried*) O-h, my— Let's see, now—

ABE. You s'pose Master Graham would allow me to swish my shirt-tail, Little Mercy?

LITTLE MERCY. (*Dancing; laughing*) If you dooded it ke-reckly, he wud, Abe!

ANN. And where is Master Graham, Mercy?

LITTLE MERCY. He's either in the school-yard playing Sister Feby with the other childerns, or he's out runnin' about after his brindle cow!

ANN. He must be after cow, then.

LITTLE MERCY. He'll be back direckly, and all the leetle childerns, and school will begin to roar ag'in. Es-

pecial'—spellin'! (*Remembering*) O-h, my, yes—! (*Going back to her conning*) Lieu. L-I-E—E-I—

ANN. And, if you're not going to take this business seriously, Abe—

ABE. (*Seriously*) A-w, but I *am*—!

ANN. I know you can live very well around New Salem here on your native sense of politeness, and the instincts of gentlemanliness with which you seem to have been born—but, nature and instincts will never inform you how to act correctly before society in Petersburg and Springfield, Abe!

ABE. (*Agreeing*) Well, I s'pose not, Ann!

ANN. (*Walking about; very seriously*) I know you are considerable of a thinker and politician, Abe, and you have a very charming and fetching way with people—and quite an independent and original mind—

ABE. (*Nodding; seriously*) Ye-h—yeh, maybe so—

ANN. —yet, if I am going to Jacksonville Female Academy in the fall, and plan to live in some large, inhabited place after we are married—

ABE. (*Stopping her; sadly*) I *know*, Ann—! I've got to l'arn to bow and palaver and be toned up and ke-rected!

ANN. Well—haven't you?

ABE. Shore! Yeh. No doubt—! (*Sadly*) When I think how my poor old Pa used to try and tickle a half-crop out of two acres of ground with a shovel-plow—

ANN. Well, it's time for you to forget your poor old Pa, Abe, and began to think of—if we're going to be married—well, think of me. Isn't it?

ABE. D'you think I'd be all flounced out this-a-way if I didn't think muchly of you, Ann—ever' livelong hour of the day, day of the week, week of the—

ANN. (*Smiling*) Well, see that you learn how to mend some of your manners this afternoon, Abe!

ABE. (*Bowing and scraping and flouncing his straw hat about*) Aye, aye, me leddy—! (*LITTLE MERCY, eyes away from her book, starts laughing*) Aye, and eye, and a great big toodle-dee-dum-m-m—

(*He does a little dance at which ANN smiles and LITTLE MERCY laughs hilariously. At the same time MASTER MENTOR GRAHAM enters, rolling his sleeves down and dusting off his hands.*)

MASTER GRAHAM. That—cow!

ABE. You aren't speaking of *me* by any chance, are you, Master Graham?

MASTER GRAHAM. I declare, the worry that critter—(*Seeing that it is ABE and ANN*) —O-h, hello, there, Abe! And Ann, too!

ANN. Well, I did get him here, Mister Graham!

MASTER GRAHAM. So I see! Congratulations! And salutations and greetings, Abe!

ABE. I don't know whether I'm properly accredited to enter your school, Master Graham—I've not had more than a twelve-month of school I'arnin' all-told in all my life!

MASTER GRAHAM. Well, Abe—I s'pect you'll do better with your twelve-month worth than most of those out there will with twelve years and a Kirkham grammar-book! (*He goes up to his desk, hanging his hat by the door.*)

ABE. I guess so. Knock off a few of my corners; rasp down the rough edges; polish up my grainy surfaces so's I'll—shine! Teach me how to interduce a duck to a dook!

(*He laughs, as do also MASTER GRAHAM and ANN.*)

MASTER GRAHAM. You think you can stand it—with the children, and all—?

LITTLE MERCY. (*Coming over; earnestly*) We all loves Abe!

ABE. (*Looking at his muddied hat*) All but one, maybe!

(*LITTLE MERCY goes out into the school-yard.*)

MASTER GRAHAM. (*Ruefully; seeing the hat*) Willie—Purkapike—?

ABE. (*Nods; then—*) Ye-p. I'll take my lesson with the rest of the little heathens. I ain't skeered. As my old Pa used— (*Then, as ANN eyes him severely*) —that is, as they say, the cowards never start and the weak ones die by the way. And I don't expect to die—not this afternoon!

MASTER GRAHAM. (*Sighing*) Well, there's no telling about little Willie Purkapike!

ANN. (*Starting to the door, parasol held out*) I must be on my way now. (*To MASTER GRAHAM*) I'm tending the store for Abe and Mr. Offut.

ABE. Yes, and you keep away from that whiskey-barrel in the corner, Ann, or Mr. Offut'll *git* you!

ANN. Yes, and you get some manners and polish about you before I see you again, Abe, or I'll *git* you!

ABE. Tarnalnation, Ann—you already done *got* me! Le's go— (*Starting out after ANN*) —back to the store!

ANN. (*Pushing ABE back with her parasol*) Oh, no, you do-n't—!

(*She leaves, putting up her parasol outside. ABE yells out the door after her, laughing.*)

ABE. I think it's mighty noble of you to think I *can* take on a coat-a perlite varnish, Ann—! And mighty optermistic! (*Then he turns back to MASTER GRAHAM, who is busy at his desk*) Dad-durst it all, Master Graham—I'm about the poorest ex-cuse of a candidate for urbanity the Lord ever put into a cambric shirt and tow-linen pantaloons and denominated Abraham Lincoln!

MASTER GRAHAM. (*Kindly*) You look all right, Abe.

ABE. I don't know how I'm going to feel straddling my six-foot-four around amongst them little youngens doing etikette! (*He notices MASTER GRAHAM is busy; goes up to the desk*) You sharpening some quills up, Master Graham?

MASTER GRAHAM. Yes—and I ought to be making some ink, too—blackberry briars and copperas. I sup-

pose— (*A bit weary*) —there are a great many things I ought to be doing!

ABE. (*Chuckling*) And all of us, as a matter of fact, Master Graham! But— (*More earnestly, eyes on MASTER GRAHAM, who is eyeing ABE's hat*) —you got something special worrying you, maybe?

MASTER GRAHAM. Schoolteaching is sort of a constant worry, Abe—if you do it right.

ABE. (*Turning his hat idly in his hands*) Is your special worry about—fourteen year old—and eyes that looks around quick-like, like something was always after him—?

MASTER GRAHAM. You've guessed it, Abe. Yesterday it was a black-locust thorn on my seat; and today he threw mud at you—

ABE. Well-l-l, now, Master Graham—I don't know he exactly threw at me. It might have just slipped out of his hand in my direction!

MASTER GRAHAM. Willie is a brilliant boy, Abe! He never loses—always wins—

ABE. He goes to the trouble of a little underhand business to win sometimes, too—doesn't he?

MASTER GRAHAM. Yes-s—but that kind of thing is foreign to him by nature. It cuts his pride that he has to do it. (*Dropping down onto his chair*) I wish—oh, I wish I knew what to do with him! Spelling lessons, and history, and moral philosophy don't seem to do him much good!

ABE. How about a little of that etikette, Master Graham? (*MASTER GRAHAM shakes his head*) I was thinking, when Ann wanted me to speak to him severely, how my own simple troubles somehow fell off of me like my old winter overcoat—when I looked into that little fellow's peaked, troubled face. Don't he never smile—nor even grin, Master Graham?

MASTER GRAHAM. I don't remember such a thing ever happening, Abe. Do you know— (*He pauses*) —his father knocked him off the fence around their cabin yesterday because Willie corrected his speech.

ABE. Do tell, now!

MASTER GRAHAM. He seems to be a boy born to the wrong parents, or—someone to understand him, or—

ABE. What that little feller needs is not l'arnin', nor etikette, but something to make him plain old *laugh*, Master Graham!

MASTER GRAHAM. Well, I wish *I* could! (*He moves toward the door*) I'll have to get the children in, now. We're having the spell-down first, then the etiquette lesson—

ABE. (*Paying MASTER GRAHAM little heed*) I was looking straight at Willie when he— (*Almost to himself*) Yes, sir, I disremember ever seeing such a sore-tried little look as the one he gave me when he was aiming that mud—nor such ornery happiness at splattering me all over my hat!

MASTER GRAHAM. (*Picking up the hand-bell from his desk*) Well—now we must bring our little woes upon us like the mantle of a thousand nights—! I'll—

(*But, before he can get to the door, LITTLE MERCY runs in, excited and breathless, gasping.*)

LITTLE MERCY. Master Graham—! Master—

MASTER GRAHAM. Yes--s-s—?

LITTLE MERCY. She's in the barley-patch a' headed for th' corn, your old brindle cow is! She just poked herse'f a-nother hole through th' stake-an'-rider fence!

ABE. (*Jamming his hat on*) I'll just go poke her back through another hole, Master Graham!

MASTER GRAHAM. Wa'it a minute, Abe—

ABE. Yes?

MASTER GRAHAM. I wish you would stay and take the spelling class for me—

ABE. But, Master Graham—I came here to l'arn etikette, not to teach! I don't know what Ann will say to me when—

MASTER GRAHAM. I—suppose so. But the cow is rather mean to handle, Abe; and I'm tired—

(*As he motions to the room, the desks all around him.*)

ABE *understands; lays an understanding hand on MASTER GRAHAM'S shoulder.*)

ABE. W'y, I d'clare, Master Graham—shore! Shore I will! You go get that brindle cow before she founders! (*He takes the bell from MASTER GRAHAM'S hand.*)

MASTER GRAHAM. Thanks, Abe!

ABE. (*Laughing*) I reckon I can't do them any kind of permanent harm—!

MASTER GRAHAM. (*Turning to leave; rolling his sleeves up; getting his hat*) And—Abe—

ABE. Ye-h, Master Graham?

MASTER GRAHAM. (*Smiling; a bit of pleading*) See what you can do about making Willie Purkapike—laugh.

ABE. (*At the door, loudly after MASTER GRAHAM, seriously*) Maybe that'd be better'n all the dag-gummed etikette lessons! (*ABE stands a second in the door. Sounds come in from the playgrounds—YELLING, LAUGHTER, a GIRL'S VOICE singing a verse of "Skip to my lou." ABE turns into the room; starts to turn back to ring the bell; stops, uncertain, scared. He scratches one ear, looks skeptically at LITTLE MERCY, who sits conning her lesson, eye on ABE. ABE starts to turn again; the CHILDREN'S VOICES come in louder. ABE starts up a broken tune to screw up his courage*)

"O-h, sinners, poor sinners,
take warning by me—

The fruits of transgression

behold now and se-e-e—!"

LITTLE MERCY. (*Getting up, worried*) It's way past time for school to be taken up, Abe!

ABE. It is—? Then I guess we'll just rare back and take her up! (*He starts to ring the bell; stops short*) I forgot— (*Pause*) I got to formerlate me a line of attack here! Le's see—*spelling*. I guess I ought to be able to spell the words first myself, oughtn't I?

LITTLE MERCY. Oh, no-o-o— (*Holding the spelling book out to ABE*) You's th' teacher an' you gits to hold th' book, Abe!

ABE. (*Grinning; taking the book*) Sa-y, that's right!

LITTLE MERCY. It's lesson IX. Today's medal is hanging on the spike back of Master Graham's desk there. And one of the words is *money*.

ABE. *Money?* Le's see— (*Thinking; then spelling, shakily*) M-O-N-Y—

LITTLE MERCY. O-h, *no!* M-O-N-E-Y!

ABE. (*Willing to arbitrate the matter*) Now, what did I say?

LITTLE MERCY. M-O-N-Y!

ABE. Well, I reckon nobody could make anything else but *money* out of my spelling!

LITTLE MERCY. (*Shaming him*) But it 't isn't the right way, Abe!

ABE. That's the truth, Little Mercy, and don't you let me cheat you out of an E's worth of your money!

LITTLE MERCY. (*Laughing*) O-o-h, A-be—!

ABE. (*Turning toward the door, bell in one hand, speller in the other*) Well—I guess I might as well start my tarnal misery working! I don't know how much spelling I'm going to teach 'em—

LITTLE MERCY. Well, I s'pect they's goin' to give you plenty to l'arn about etikette, Abe!

ABE. (*Wryly*) You—s'pose? (*He rings the bell; yells outdoors*) Come on in, you measely little critters! Come on in and get eddycated! Come one, come all, and get good-and-eddycated, by daddys!

(*The CHILDREN—four little BOYS and two little GIRLS—surge up to the door, led by WILLIE PURKAPIKE, a handsome lad with a troubled face—and rush in on past ABE, paying him little heed, excited, yelling, laughing.*)

WILLIE PURKAPIKE. Hops on the mall tomorrow—!

BENNIE. Le's don't throw the mall; le's—!

ARTHUR. Le's play four-corner bull-pen!

PHILIP. Or pum-pum-pullaway—!

ABE. (*Trying to get a word in*) Or-der, all—!

WILLIE. We aren't going to play any games with girls in them!

SAIRY. I don't want to play, anyways! (*Conning loudly to herself at her desk*) "Four barley-corns equals one inch; four inches equals to one hand; three hands equals a foot—"

ABE. (*Louder*) I'd like a little order, here!

BENNIE. (*Yelling*) What about hoppin' th' half-gammon?

ARTHUR. (*Discovering ABE*) H-y—there's Abe!

(*The CHILDREN, except WILLIE, all turn excitedly; yelling; rush to him.*)

CHILDREN. A-be! What you still doin' yur'? Hoo-ray fer Abe!

BENNIE. C'mon, le's play, Abe!

ARTHUR. Hey, you bring us any lickerish drops?

ABE. (*Tussling with them*) Look out, you A-rabs! Le'go my coat-tails! I got my dignity, you know!

BERTHA FINCH. Throw yer dignerty out th' windore, Abe!

ABE. I'm your new spelling-master, and I—

BENNIE. (*Yelling; hilariously*) You goin' to passel out the wuds today, Abe?

ABE. (*Yelling*) Quiet, you hyenas! I tell you young-ens I'm here for serious purposes—!

PHILIP. You're the only one, then, Abe!

WILLIE. Let's go back out and play dare-base!

ARTHUR. Last one there's—*it*!

ABE. (*Planting himself in the door*) First one tries to get through this door, I'll lam on the—!

WILLIE. (*Walking up to ABE*) You wouldn't dare to hit me, Lincoln!

ABE. Now, you hush up that kind of talk, William, or I'll—

WILLIE. I dare you to! I—dare you to!

ABE. (*Standing sternly*) You go ahead and try to get through.

LITTLE MERCY. (*Rushing over to ABE's side; upset*)

Don't you talk that way to Abe! It ain't nice! I might out-spell him anyways, Abe!

ABE. I'm sure you might!

WILLIE. She can't out-spell me any such thing! I'll show her, too. Nobody can out-spell me! I've won ten medals already—! (*To ABE*) Are you going to let me go out, or are you going to be a coward about it?

ABE. (*Mad*) Now, look, you little third generation of a—second generation, you can't call me that!

WILLIE. Well, I did!

BENNIE. You ort to thrash him, Abe! Here, I'll he'p you—!

ABE. (*Pushing BENNIE aside; facing up to WILLIE patiently, but firmly, down to the unhappy lad*) I would jist like to say this to you, William, real pointed-like—(*He pauses, gravely*) I suppose throwing mud at my new hat was mighty small punkins in the sight of the Lord—and it didn't hurt the hat, nor me much—but it may have done *you* a sight of damage if it gave you the idea you can do those mean and ornery things and always get past with them, William.

WILLIE. (*Taken aback; sputtering; but refusing to give in a jot*) I—I consider myself—better than you, Lincoln! My father's a hatter, and I'm goiug to be a hatter, and that's lots more than being a nobody-partner to a drunkard in a store that hasn't got anything on its shelves but dust!

LITTLE MERCY. Ho-w awful, Willie—!

WILLIE. And I can beat you spelling, too, and I'll show you that!

ABE. (*Laying a kindly hand down upon WILLIE PURKAPIKE'S shoulder*) I guess maybe I could whop you one mighty easy, William. But it would look kind of silly for a big feller like me to lay-into a smart, bright chap like you. C'mon, let's shake hands!

WILLIE. (*Tossing his head; bitter; humiliated*) I have other more important things to do. And I don't go about saying *ain't*, nor *feller*, nor *punkins*, neither! (*He walks away from ABE to his seat, where he sits down.*)

ABE. (*Turning to the other CHILDREN*) Well, in that case, boys and girls, we'll just set about our spelling lesson!

ARTHUR. O-h, Abe—are you really goin' to teach us suthin'?

SAIRY. Of course he is!

WILLIE. He means, he's going to *try* to!

ABE. (*Nodding*) That's right, William!

ARTHUR. How about a few lickerish drops, Abe—just on th' side?

ABE. You youngens just sit down now—if you can!

SAIRY. (*Going to her seat*) Philip's stealin' my copy-book!

BENNY. He's goin' to write notes in it an' draw pi-ctures!

PHILIP. I'm not, neither!

SAIRY. Yes, you are!

PHILIP. Ain't!

ABE. No-w—!

SAIRY. Are!

ABE. (*Yelling*) Sit— (*Then remembering who he is now, calmer*) —down. (*He hits the desk with a ruler*) Or, I'm going to use this ruler, and it won't be on your foolscaps, either—if you understand my perffessional meaning!

WILLIE. That's a nice way for a teacher to talk, isn't it?

ABE. (*Wheeling on WILLIE*) What say, William—?

WILLIE. (*Turning away*) Nothing.

ABE. (*Going to the front*) Now that you're all seated, you wouldn't look too bad if your faces were washed and your hair brushed! (*LITTIE MERCY puts up her hand*) Yes, Miss Mercy?

LITTLE MERCY. Spell-down is first, next—Teacher.

WILLIE. I've gotten ten medals already—!

BERTHA. Aw, my Uncle Fuller, he—!

ARTHUR. I could, too, if I studied!

SAIRY. Master Graham says if I—!

ABE. (*Hands out, hushing them*) I know; I know! You're all so bright it hurts the sun to shine on a clear

day! Now, the first thing ain't— (*Correcting himself*)
—aren't—

WILLIE. Isn't.

ABE. Thank you for pulling me out of that loblolly, William! (*Then going on*) It isn't going to be spelling today. First, it's going to be a story told by me to see if I can't get you all into proper good spirits—to laughing, for instance.

BENNIE. Story! Story!

SAIRY.

Goody, goody gouch,
Shirt-tail's out—

PHILIP. Goody, goody gin—

ABE. D'you youngens want to hear this yarn? (*The CHILDREN hush up at once*) Well, then! Boys and girls, there was once a tortoise travelling along a road. It wasn't long before he met a hare—that is, a rabbit—

ALL. Aw, we know that'n! An' th' tortoise won! Tha's old Aesoppy!

ABE. Well—that one wasn't so successful from the reports of all the cabbage-heads! Le's see— (*The CHILDREN lean forward*) —there's a book, a mighty good book, too—that's got a saying in it that goes something like "He that ruleth his spirit—"

ALL. (*Loud, blasting ABE*) "—is greater than he that ruleth a city!"

(*Silence.*)

ABE. (*A bit confounded*) Yeh, yeh! So you know that'n, too? Well, I bet you I have one here in my noggin you don't know!

WILLIE. (*Challenging*) What is it?

ABE. Once upon a time there was a cooper that lived in Indianna. Now, this cooper had a pretty daughter. She— (*He stops short*) Who-oa, there, Abe! Naw; naw!

CHILDREN. (*Yelling, wanting more*) Go on! Tell us s'more! What happent to her?

ABE. I can't tell you that'n!

ALL. (*Jumping up and down, whistling, clapping*) We never heerd it! What'd she do? Go on; go on! Tell th' story!

ABE. (*Silences them with his hands; then firmly*) We'll have the spell-down for the medal next on the docket!

CHILDREN. (*Disappointed*) A-a-a-w! (*ABE goes over and takes the medal off its nail and comes back to the CHILDREN*) Here's the medal the winner gets. (*He examines it*) It's got a goose— (*Closer*) —no, an eagle, on it!

LITTLE MERCY. (*Sighing*) It's so perty, Abe!

ABE. But it's not half as perty as you are, Little Mercy!

WILLIE. I have ten of them already!

ABE. So I've heard ten times already, William! Well, I don't know just how you conduct these spelling hoe-downs, but we used to—

LITTLE MERCY. We just stand in a row, Abe—

(*The CHILDREN get up, anxious to show ABE how it's done.*)

ARTHUR. And you trap down the row; then you start and trap down the row over again.

SAIRY. And when we miss, we sit down.

WILLIE. And I've never missed; so I've never sat down!

ABE. Don't you ever win, Little Mercy?

WILLIE. No, she doesn't. Nor Bennie, nor Arthur, nor Philip, nor Lulu Green who isn't here—nor anybody else. I only win.

ABE. Well, now—I wonder what would happen if she was to win—once?

WILLIE. (*Gasping; purple*) Why, I'd—I'd—why—!

ABE. (*Calmly*) That's all right, William—don't go blow up before the fracas begins! All right, line up, now—

(*The CHILDREN scurry to line up, with WILLIE going to the head of the line.*)

WILLIE. I might as well go to the head now.

ARTHUR. And me to th' tail, I s'pose!

LITTLE MERCY. (*Nervous*) Oh, my; oh, me—! (*To herself*) —“i before e except after c—”

ABE. (*Fingering his place in the spelling book*) Well, is everybody set to go?

ARTHUR. I guess I'll be goin' to set perty soon!

ABE. I'll start with the first feller, then. William—suppose you spell *recede* for me.

WILLIE. (*Certain; precise*) *Recede*. R-E; re—C-E-D-E; *cede—recede*.

ABE. Well, that was short and sweet! You know, I like to hear a feller spell like that, or do anything like that!

WILLIE. It's not unnatural amongst certain people.

ABE. Ummm—so I see, William.

BENNIE. (*Worried*) What's my word?

ABE. Here's the next now. *Actress*.

BENNIE. *Actress*. A-C-T; act—R-E-S-S; *ress—actress*.

ABE. Fine, fine! Now, Mercy—

LITTLE MERCY. Oh, my! (*Conning to herself*) “—i before e except after c as in *neighbor*—” Oh, no—

WILLIE. I'm not afraid—ever!

ABE. *Blemish*.

LITTLE MERCY. (*Brightly*) *Blemish*. B-L-E-M; *blem—I-S-H; ish—blemish*. (*Low*) Goody, goody!

ABE. Now, Arthur—*Pigment*.

ARTHUR. I—oh—well—*pigment*. P-I-G; *pig—*

ABE. You have the front end in the pen; now, go on.

ARTHUR. M-E-A-N-T; *ment—pigment*. (*He goes to his seat before he finishes.*)

BENNIE. No-o!

ABE. (*Looking for the next word in the speller*) I guess you couldn't quite h'ist the other end up, Arthur. Sit down.

ARTHUR. (*Cheerfully*) I done have, Abe!

ABE. Now, Sairy. *Mimicker*.

SAIRY. *Mimicker*. M-I-M; *mim—M-I-C-K-E-R; micker—mim-micker*.

ABE. Sorry, Sairy. You succeeded in giving me an extra *M* there.

SAIRY. (*Running over to her seat*) Oh, well—Mama says the Lord loveth a cheerful giver, Abe!

ABE. Philip. *Management.*

PHILIP. M-A-N; *man*—A-G; *ag*—M-E-N-T.

ABE. You missed your *E*, Philip. You're down, too. (*PHILIP goes to his seat*) Now, Bertha— (*BERTHA gets all set; then she starts crying loudly.*)

ABE. What's the matter, here?

BERTHA. I jist re-member whut's comin' up next and I cain't spell it!

ABE. Well, now—

BERTHA. (*Going to her seat*) I jist cain't spell none of 'em!

ABE. You just can't *spell*, eh?

BERTHA. No-o-o—and I know I'll be an old maid, I know! O-o-h—

BENNIE. Y' might as well spell me next, Abe. I'm gittin' taard standin' an' I know I'm goin' down. I allus do.

ABE. Let's see, now—*rudiment.*

BENNY. (*On his way to his seat*) *Rudiment.* R-O-O-D; *rud*—A; *a*—M-I-N-T—ah— (*He sits in his seat*) Old school seat's done got me ag'in, Abe!

ABE. (*Lifting his head up from the speller; seeing WILLIE PURKAPIKE and LITTLE MERCY standing alone now*) I guess we're on our last trap-down, then—?

WILLIE. You don't need to seem so hopeful about it! She's not going to win!

ABE. I've got a story I could tell you on that point, William, but—here's an easy one. Look out, now.

WILLIE. Well, what is it?

ABE. It's probably one you overlooked, it's so easy!

WILLIE. (*Nervously*) Please hurry!

ABE. Just hold your 'taters, now. Let's see. It's—

WILLIE. Yes-s—?

LITTLE MERCY. (*Excited, dancing on her toes*) Ooooooh—!

ABE. *Flannel.*

WILLIE. (*Hurried; nervous*) Flannel. F-L-A-N; flan—N-E-L; nel—

ABE. That's—!

WILLIE. (*Uncertain; flustered*) —L.

ABE. What was that, now?

WILLIE. (*To himself*) N-E-L-L; nel—N-E-L; nel—N-N-E-L—

ABE. All of them, or you takes your choice?

WILLIE. (*Loud; certain now*) Flannel. F-L-A-N; flan—N-E-L— (*Silence. CHILDREN all silent; uncertain; then, scared*) —L.

ARTHUR. (*Leaping up; yelling*) Wrong!

PHILIP. Only one L!

WILLIE. (*Horrified; tragically*) Oh, I knew I shouldn't! I knew—! (*Shouting, defiant*) But I've not lost! I've not! Not yet! She's got to spell, and I know what's next, and I know she'll miss it! I've not lost! I've another chance!

ABE. Now, take it easy, William—!

WILLIE. I've not lost—yet! She can't spell it! I'll—I'll—!

LITTLE MERCY. (*Almost hysterical*) Oh, don't, William!

ABE. (*To LITTLE MERCY*) *Lieu*.

LITTLE MERCY. *Lieu*—for me?

WILLIE. I knew it!

LITTLE MERCY. (*Flustered; utterly lost*) *Lieu?*

ABE. Like, "I go in lieu of my brother."

LITTLE MERCY. (*Faintly*) Yes— (*Repeating*) "I go—in lieu of my brother. I go in lieu—"

WILLIE. Well, spell it, and stop chattering.

LITTLE MERCY. "I go in lieu of my brother— I—" L— (*Pause; panicky*) —Oh, my, I don't—I—!

ABE. Now, look at me, Mercy. (*Closing one eye*) You can see—how my eye— (*Emphasizing the vowel sounds*) —is feasting on you—isn't it?

WILLIE. (*Puzzled; belligerent*) And what does that mean? Why are you saying that silly thing?

LITTLE MERCY. (*Confused*) "My eye—feast—on

you—my eye—fe—you— (*Brightening; beaming*) O-h, yes! L-I-E-U!

ABE. That's right! (*WILLIE PURKAPIKE is horrified for a second until he sees ABE giving the shiny medal to LITTLE MERCY*) I guess this is—

WILLIE. (*Crying out; fear; hurt*) No! No! I haven't lost! I haven't! I hate you! I hate you all! You're all against me! You want to beat me! (*He drops into a seat; beats his fists on the one in front of him*) Like this, you want to beat me! (*Crying*) No! No—o!

(*He sobs. The other CHILDREN look on silently; then disgusted.*)

CHILDREN. Po-o-oh! Just acting up! You ort to whup him, Abe! Nobody else takes on that-a-way! I heard that his old man—

ABE. (*Quickly; kindly; low*) Now, look—all you children go out and play, and leave William and me have a little private session.

LITTLE MERCY. (*Sad*) But, Abe—I didn't honestly—

ABE. I know. You can stay, Mercy. (*Shooing the CHILDREN out*) Go on, now, children—

(*They move out of the schoolroom silently; then break loose with yells and games, at once completely forgetting WILLIE PURKAPIKE.*)

WILLIE. (*Still in his seat*) You made me lose, Abe Lincoln! You made me, and—I'll get you! I'll—tear you! I'll— (*He turns away*) 'They'll laugh at me! They'll grin behind my back, and giggle! I can see them! They'll taunt me!

ABE. (*Firmly*) Hark-ee, now, William—

WILLIE. I don't know what to do! I—o-h, go away—!

ABE. (*Letting himself down into one of the seats awkwardly*) I'm going to sit down right here beside you—if I can— (*He gets into the seat.*)

WILLIE. You only want to hurt me more! Nobody

likes me! Father doesn't! Why doesn't anybody? (*Pleading*) Say I really didn't lose! Say it's not true! Say it! Say it!

ABE. Well, I guess I'll have to, Willie. You really didn't lose.

WILLIE. (*Hopefully*) But— (*Then bitterly*) You know I did! You know I did! You're lying!

ABE. No—you really didn't lose, Willie. No.

WILLIE. (*Taken back*) You mean—? You don't mean—?

ABE. Little Mercy and I had a little joke betwixt us.

(LITTLE MERCY *nods her head vociferously*. WILLIE is *aghast*.)

WILLIE. A—joke? What joke?

ABE. Wasn't it a joke, Mercy?

LITTLE MERCY. Almost, Abe!

WILLIE. And I—I won?

ABE. I think by rights maybe you ought to have the medal. Don't you, Mercy?

LITTLE MERCY. (*Greatly pleased*) Oh, yes. William, here it is. Yours for keeps!

WILLIE. Oh— (*Bursting out crying*) —but no! I don't deserve it! Oh, Mr. Lincoln, I—

ABE. Just call me Abe, Willie.

WILLIE. I didn't lose then, did I? I didn't, really?

ABE. (*Kindly; patiently*) No-o. And not only that—I'd like to kind of present you with something, Willie. Just to show you how much we all highly esteem you.

WILLIE. (*Eagerly*) What is—but, I guess maybe I—

ABE. Well— (*Pause*) —some years ago in a store in Indiana where I was working, a stranger came in and, amongst other things, he started staring at me uncertain-like. He stared, and stared; and then he shook his head like he'd made up his mind, and came over to me. "Excuse me, sir," said he to me, "but I have an article in my possession that prop'ly belongs to you." Well, I had no idee what he meant, so I said, "How's that, Stranger?"

WILLIE. (*Interested*) Yes-s-s—?

ABE. To which he says, "This knife—" (*ABE gets a knife out of his pocket*) "—this beautiful china-handled knife—"

WILLIE. (*Gasping at the sight of the knife*) O-h!

ABE. "—was placed in my hands some years ago with the injunction that I was to keep it till I found a man homelier than myse'f. I have to say, sir, I think *you* are fairly entitled to the property!"

LITTLE MERCY. (*Laughing*) Well, Abe!

WILLIE. (*Awed*) And he gave the knife to you-u?

ABE. (*Laughing*) Yes, sir. Isn't it a nice one?

WILLIE. Awfully!

ABE. And to show you there's one feller in this world that loves you, Willie—I'm just going to turn this homely business around and—give it to a little feller that's handsomer than me— (*He hands the knife out to WILLIE.*)

WILLIE. Me-e-e—? Not—me. Nobody's ever given *me*—! For—me? All mine?

ABE. Shore! Take it, son!

WILLIE. (*Taking it, not knowing what to say*) Sakes-alive, I—

ABE. I only hope I'll grow up to be as handsome a feller as you are!

WILLIE. Aw, Abe—you couldn't! That is, I mean— (*He starts to cry again*) I didn't mean to say *that*! I—

ABE. Now, that's all right. (*Winking at WILLIE*) I know I shore couldn't, with the bad start I've got! (*ABE laughs*) Not without somebody passing a major miracle!

(WILLIE PURKAPIKE *laughs*; LITTLE MERCY *laughs*; *they all laugh happily as WILLIE admires the knife, and ABE and LITTLE MERCY admire WILLIE. The sound of the CHILDREN's merry, raucous game outside comes in. Then ANN appears in the door; comes in; sees the three. WILLIE sees ANN standing there first.*)

WILLIE. (*Cheerfully*) How-do, Miss Ann.

(ABE turns; smiles at ANN; sees her serious demeanor; remembers; gets up from the seat anxiously.)

ABE. Dag-gum, it—I forgot, Ann—that is, by golly, Master Graham—

ANN. (*Severely*) Little Arthur Crowder ran-off down to the store for licorice drops.

ABE. I plead innocent, or—but—!

ANN. He said Master Graham left you teaching, and— (*The sounds of the merry CHILDREN come in loud from outside*) —oh, Abe, you're letting the children run all about loose, and yell, and—I know Master Graham will be angry!

ABE. Now, Ann—!

ANN. And, not any etiquette lesson—the whole afternoon wasted—

LITTLE MERCY. Oh, no— (*Eyes on WILLIE PURKA-PIKE*) —not really wasted, Ann!

ABE. It's not really my fault I didn't learn how to bow and palaver and swish my skirts ke-reckly.

ANN. Perhaps not; but you're not even keeping Master Graham's school right! (*Worried*) I declare, I don't know what's to become of you, Abe—!

ABE. Well, now, I don't think Master Graham is going to be a bit disappointed. I've done just exactly what he asked me to do.

ANN. (*Surprised*) But, the children, and—

WILLIE. (*Smiling up at ABE*) You mean—about me—Abe?

ABE. (*A hand on WILLIE's shoulder*) You see Willie, here—?

ANN. It's the boy who hit your hat. Have you spoken to him?

ABE. W'y, yes. But not severely. You notice, Ann—Willie is—smiling.

ANN. (*A bit amused*) Well, yes, I see.

ABE. Those were Master Graham's directions as he

was leaving—and I got them working, by golly didn't we, Willie?

WILLIE. We surely did, Abe! We didn't usually use to smile. I didn't, because—well, just because I couldn't! (*Pause; confidently, eyes on ABE's face, gripping the knife in his hand, happy*) But—I can now!

ABE. (*Nodding; grinning down on WILLIE*) And wasn't that a pretty good afternoon's work for one poor white man and a span of mules?

LITTLE MERCY. (*On tiptoe*) It was jist wonnerful, Abe! It was— (*She turns; sees MASTER GRAHAM entering slowly, tiredly*) O-h, Master Graham— (*She runs to him.*)

MASTER GRAHAM. I got the brindle cow in at last, for the last time—

LITTLE MERCY. (*Pointing to WILLIE PURKAPIKE; delighted*) Be-hold, an' lookit; Master Graham!

(MASTER GRAHAM *looks to where WILLIE stands smiling, proudly whittling a stick with his brand-new China-handled knife.*)

MASTER GRAHAM. (*Surprised; pleased*) Well, William—! What have you got?

WILLIE. (*Showing the knife*) Abe gave it to me. He also gave me some advice, too, Master Graham.

MASTER GRAHAM. (*Smiling, toward ABE*) I suppose it was very good advice—?

WILLIE. It was very good and very useful. (*Laughing ruefully*) Almost as useful as this beautiful knife he gave me!

(MASTER GRAHAM *laughs, delighted.*)

ABE. Willie and I worked it all out, Master Graham—

MASTER GRAHAM. So I see! (*The sounds of the CHILDREN come in. MASTER GRAHAM grows concerned*) I think I'll have to go out and send them home.

ANN. (*Anxiously, eyes on ABE*) But I thought, perhaps—

MASTER GRAHAM. (*Not hearing ANN, going to the door, as ABE grins contentedly*) I'm going to have to get you to take my brindle cow in charge, Abe!

WILLIE. (*Following MASTER GRAHAM*) And see if he can get *her* to laugh, too, Master Graham?

LITTLE MERCY. (*Following; tickled; laughing hilariously*) O-o-oh, Wil-l-l-i-e—!

(*ABE stands chuckling; ANN stands amused, a bit of a smile, till ABE turns toward her a little sheepishly. Then she looks somewhat provoked at ABE.*)

ABE. (*Going to get his hat*) Do you figure I failed you pretty bad—again—Ann?

ANN. (*Kindly*) Heavens, Abe—I never know what to figure with—you! (*WARN Curtain.*)

ABE. (*Stopping short; a far-away look; muchly pleased*) It was just like the sun and the stars burstin' out all together to hear that little Willie Purkapike laugh! Aw, Ann—that's a plagued sight better'n your etikette, isn't it?

ANN. (*Sighing; with a smile; going toward the door to leave*) I'm really sadly disappointed in you, though, Abe—

ABE. (*Bursting out laughing*) That's just what my old Pa said the first time he got a good look at me! (*Clapping his hat onto his head; not at all sadly*) I guess I'm just doomed to go through life without that etikette lesson, Ann!

ANN. (*Sighing*) I suppose so.

ABE. (*Starting out in front of her, then stopping, backing up, bowing, and letting her go out ahead of him, laughing*) Now, ain't I perlite enough as I am, Ann—?

ANN. (*Laughing*) I reckon you *air*, Abe, dear!

(*They leave. A second's stillness. Then ABE's voice, going off, singing.*)

ABE. (*Singing, or trying to*)

“O-o-o-h, thou in whose presence
my soul takes de-e-light

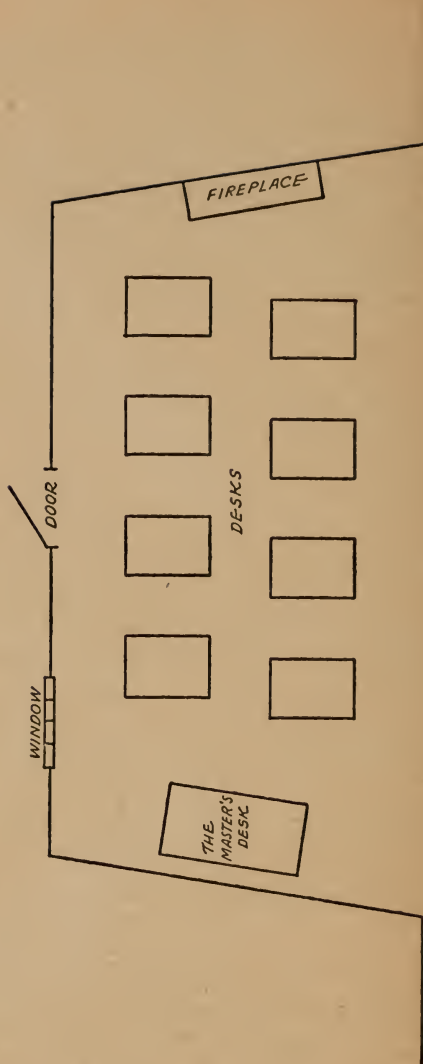
On whom in affliction I cal-l-l—

My comfort by day, and my song in the night,

My hope, my salvation, my al-l-l—”!

CURTAIN

EXTERIOR



SCENE DESIGN
"A CHINA-HANDLED KNIFE"





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